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The myth of the fatherless society

[Anna Tarrant](#) and [Michael Ward](#)

Society has a problem with absent men. Every other week it seems there are warnings that [fathers aren't there](#) for their families, and that men are absent from social institutions like [childcare](#), [schools](#) and [other support settings](#). It's a problem that is driving concern over [how children are being raised](#), as well as the wider difficulties it can cause [outside the family](#).

This “[crisis of fatherlessness](#)” debate has remarkable endurance, attracting regular and considerable [public](#) and [policy attention](#), particularly in recent years.

Andy Cook, chief executive of think-tank the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), recently claimed that almost half of all children born in Britain today will [not be living with both of their parents](#) by the time they reach the age of 15. Cook said that parenting is too much of a throwaway culture, adding that “we need a societal shift in perspective from regarding fathers as a dispensable extra to recognising their value as a crucial pillar in a child's life”.

The CSJ previously found that 75% of the public believe that fathers not being present is [a serious problem](#). However, referring to the issue as a “crisis” is a massive leap from the CSJ's “serious problem”. And using it as a key cause for issues like the poverty and social disadvantage that young people face today is problematic to say the least.

Fathers matter

In a nutshell, the fatherlessness debate focuses on the lack of men in the lives of their children – particularly boys. Fathers certainly matter to children whether they are [absent or present](#), however, it is when dads are confidently engaged in the lives of their children that there is a [positive effect](#) on child well-being and family relationships.

But the “fear” is overblown. The blame for young people's poverty or any other issues are firmly rooted in assumptions about the failures of parents: working-class fathers in particular are stigmatised, branded with [lazy stereotypes](#) like “deadbeat dads” and “feckless fathers”.

Though it makes sense to worry that dads aren't present, it is not so easy to say that the behaviour of the stereotypes are the sole cause of young people's problems generally. Rarely, if ever, does the discussion include professional men whose busy lives might mean they miss out on spending time with their children, or whose children are schooled away from home. It also says a lot about how we feel about single, female-headed households.

Deadbeat dads are a dangerous stereotype. www.shutterstock.com

Present without presence

So where is this concern coming from? Look at the census data between 2005 and 2012 and it shows that – despite increased attention to fatherless families – the proportion of lone parent families with dependent children in the UK has [gone up only marginally](#) since the early 2000s.

The data also ignores the range of social fathering that takes place more and more in [reconstituted families](#). So while the number of single parents has stayed consistent, they may have met new partners. And even where parents remain alone, parenting can occur across households, as well as within.

Both men and women from different generations in the family can also play an important part in raising and supporting children where the father is not present, either [informally](#) or as [kinship carers](#), although this is often with limited financial support.

Looking to the young men themselves, the [social problems](#) they face are often [reduced to gender](#) just to make them easier for the public to understand. This is no help when, for example, both men and women can experience things like poverty, and it shouldn't be assumed that only men can help men. Fathers and other male role models certainly do play an important part in helping young men to flourish, but women and men in other mentoring positions can provide the care, trust and support that young men might need.

Young fathers

Research has previously found that fatherhood can have as much of an effect on the health of men – [particularly young men](#) – as it does on women. While [we are finding](#) that fatherhood matters to young men and they do desire to be there for their children, they are often considered more of a risk by professionals – through severe material disadvantage or criminality – [to themselves or their children](#).

Young dads with extensive support needs require practical help with education, training, employment, housing and finance, and so are often overlooked as [capable carers](#) – simply because they are not recognised as being as caring as women. If support services were more father inclusive and attentive to the diverse needs of fathers from all walks of life, this [could help them more effectively](#) to be involved in raising their children.

The research doesn't back up the "crisis", and is in fact looking at the wrong issue. Fathers still need support, but they cannot be blamed for all the problems their children may face. The way we talk about and address modern families needs to change too. Rather than stigmatising those who do not live as a nuclear family, we would be better off supporting and including them in our changing society.

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